Hoe of Hoes: An Interpretation? by Ann Mullaney

In 1533 (or thereabouts) Teofilo Folengo published a collection of poems in Latin titled *Varium poema* in a slim volume which also included a narrative poem, *Janus*, and prose pieces by his brother Giambattista Folengo. One poem will serve as a springboard for this brief meditation on reading and interpretation.

Blanditur suo ligoni.

AMO te merito Ligo ligonum
Antistes, nitidi minister horti,
Nam quantum est, vel erit, vel ante constat
Tot iam secla fuisse sarculorum,
Nemo te melius repurgat herbas,
Unde tot sata, multiplexque vernat
Pubertas holerum, decusque florum.
Tua namque opera Nemus virentum
Betarum superat, suosque late
Dat lactuca dapum quies lacertos,
Non est dicere quanta brassycarum
Sit vis: dispeream nisi praealtis
Se herbae subiiciant pares Cupressis.

He flatters his hoe

I love you, Hoe, rightly so, master of hoes, minister of the lush garden, for, however many mattocks there are or will be or it is established there have been now for many eons, nobody cleans out the herbs better than you, whence so many plantings, a manifold fruitfulness of edibles springs forth, and a splendor of flowers. For, thanks to your efforts the vigorous Grove of beets flourishes and the lettuce – repose of feasts – offers its foliage; one cannot say what verve of cabbages there may be: let me perish if the herbs don't shoot up from below like very tall Cypresses.

Three ways to read this poem come readily to mind:

A. Straight encomium.
Teofilo Folengo was a Benedictine monk, Benedictines were attached to the land: Quote warm invocations penned by clergy of the era, perhaps focusing on those featuring tools regarded not as communal property, but as a monk's personal asset.

B. Folksy acclaim.
The poem is a bit childlike in its glorification of hoe and herbs: Cite previous Folengo scholarship.

C. Playful boast.

The hoe is a phallic symbol, herbs and vegetables are metaphors for various matters a hoe might attend to: Note the jocular tone and draw from the following lines of inquiry.

1. Analysis of the meter: Hendecasyllables, which in Latin are associated with Catullus and somewhat with Martial; the meter was considered a vehicle for light and scurrilous verse.

2. Analysis of the vocabulary: is there any precedent for interpreting a hoe as a phallus? Emphatically so, to cite just one example, the *Priapeia*, a collection of poems by Roman authors from around 50BCE-50CE; annotated, and translated into English by Leonard C. Smithers and Sir Richard Burton, published in 1890, available in a useful format at https://www.sacredtexts.com/cla/priap/index.htm, see too "Coded Latin words listed in both the Smithers and Burton 1890 English edition of the *Priapeia* and in the Folengos' 1533 volume," www.folengo.com. Compare *Priapus* by contemporary author, Pietro Bembo, *Carminum libellus*, Venice, Gualtiero Scotto, 1552/3, Google Play Books; *Lyric Poetry, Etna*, edited and translated by Mary P. Chatfield, Harvard UP, I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2005. And for more on Latin sexual vocabulary, see *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* by J. N. Adams, Baltimore, JHU Press, 1990.

3. Do any other poems in the *Varium poema* show potential for interpretation in an erotic light? Most of the poems in the collection readily suggest suggestive meanings, including quite a few involving gardening, like the curious one about his brother's love of horticulture:

Nam illum utile, multiplexque semen Occultare solo iuvat feraci, Mox rivo tenui strepentis undae Inducit vitreum satis liquorem,	for it pleases him to conceal the valuable and versatile seed in the fertile soil; then he introduces ample glassy liquid with a fine stream of noisy ripples,

39. De Io. Bap. Chrysogono, 19-22.

See the digitized volume (with or without my English translations) and Additional Notes and Illustrations, www.folengo.com,.

4. Do any other works by Teofilo show a similar use of double meanings? Yes, especially the *Orlandino* (1525), and the *Chaos del Triperuno* (1527).

5. And the Latin prose opus by his brother (Giambattista or Giovanni Battista) published in the same volume with Teofilo's *carmina*, does this contain any equivocal language? Indeed, the *Dialogues, which he calls Dwarves/ Big Little pieces* (*Dialogi, quos Pomiliones vocat*) are chock full of innuendo. Giovanni Battista Folengo went on to publish a number of other volumes: all of his subsequent works showcase erotic word-play: his volumes from 1540, 1543, 1546 and 1555, along with later editions, are available at Google Play Books and folengo.com.

Incidentally, a letter introducing the third edition of Teofilo Folengo's Macaronic works was nominally penned by another brother, Francesco Folengo. In this, Francesco toys

with readers about whether or not “brilliant allegories were hidden under rough bark,” *Francesco Folengo alli lettori*, *Macaronicorum poema*, Cipadense (dated 1530, but c. 1535), pp. 1v-2v. Also, the brothers’ uncle, Nicodemo Folengo, although he did not generally use coded words in his Latin verse, did use explicitly sexual vocabulary, *Carmina*, Carlo Cordié and Alessandro Perosa, (Pisa, [Rome, Armellini], 1990), http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/.

6. Do any other writers of the era use coded words to express erotic meanings?
Oh my yes: Jean Toscan has identified nearly one hundred such authors, in *Le carnaval du langage: le lexique érotique des poètes de l’équivoque de Burchiello à Marino (XVe-XVIIe siècles)*, Lille, Presses Universitaires, (1978) 1981.

7. And Italian writers from other eras, did they ever use agriculture and gardening terminology to express sexual activities and proclivities? Affirmative, see Walter Boggione and Giovanni Casalegno, *Dizionario storico del lessico erotico italiano: Metafore, eufemismi, oscenità, doppi sensi, parole dotte e parole basse in otto secoli di letteratura italiana*, Milan, Longanesi, 1996.

Part 2: Interpretation

Let’s turn to an example familiar to many: the Biggus Dickus scene from the 1979 film, Monty Python’s *The Life of Brian*. Widely available on YouTube and other sites, a central portion of the scene is scripted as follows: Pilate (Michael Palin) is interrogating captive Brian (Graham Chapman).

> PILATE: So, your father was a woeman. Who was he?
> BRIAN: He was a centurion, in the Jerusalem Garrisons.
> PILATE: Weally? What was his name?
> BRIAN: 'Nautius Maximus.'
> CENTURION: Ahh, ha ha.
> PILATE: Centuwion, do we have anyone of that name in the gawwison?
> CENTURION: Well, no, sir.
> PILATE: Well, you sound vewy sure. Have you checked?
> CENTURION: Well, no, sir. Umm, I think it's a joke, sir, like, uh, 'Sillius Soddus' or... 'Biggus Dickus,' sir.
> PILATE: What's so... funny about 'Biggus Dickus'?
> CENTURION: Well, it's a joke name, sir.
> PILATE: I have a vewy gweat fwiend in Wome called 'Biggus Dickus.'

My question is this: would you call the observation by the soldier an interpretation or a reading, or would you dismiss it as “wowdy webel sniggewing”?

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